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Ukraine Conflict Update, 01-17 April 2022

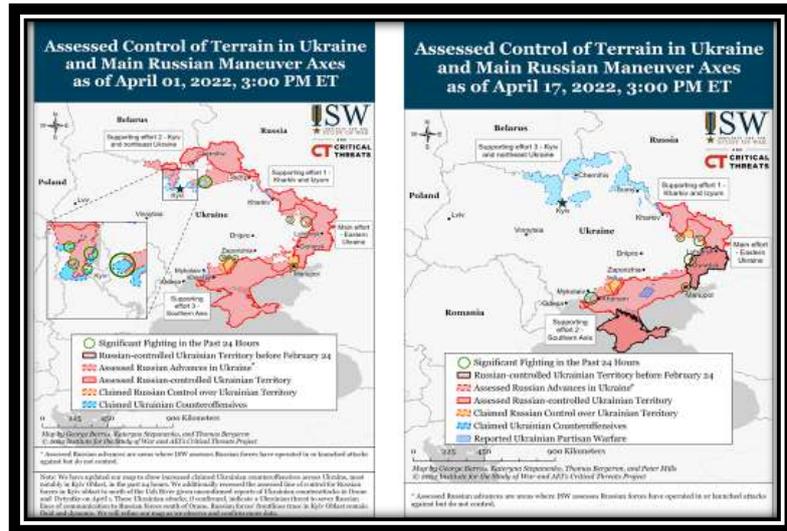
Israel Conducts Successful Interceptions with Lasers

China delivers anti-aircraft missiles to Serbia

Ukraine Conflict Update, 01-17 April 2022

During the last 17 days, the conflict in Ukraine has seen some remarkable development. On March 29th Alexander Fomin, Russia’s deputy defence minister announced a drastic reduction in operations around Kyiv and Chernihiv “to increase mutual trust and create the necessary conditions for further negotiations.” Earlier, Russia’s defence ministry claimed that “The main tasks of the first stage of the operation have been completed.” Accordingly, Russian forces began to withdraw from Northern Ukraine to Belarus.

With the retreat of Russian forces, numerous reports about civilian atrocities and mass execution began to emerge. UN General Assembly on 07 April 2022 suspended Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council over "reports of "gross and systematic violations and abuses of human rights" by invading Russian troops in Ukraine.



On 08 April, Russia designated General Alexander Dvornikov, commander of Russia’s southern military district as the unified commander for the Ukraine operation. The appointment marks Moscow’s attempt to rid itself of its Achilles heel in the war – the coherent, centralised management of its forces on the ground. On the same day, a Russian Tochka-U missile struck a civilian evacuation point at the Kramatorsk rail station in eastern Ukraine, killing around 50 and wounding a score of an evacuee.

Russia continued with offensive operations in Eastern Ukraine in a limited manner as it worked to reconstitute forces withdrawn from northern Ukraine.



Russian forces continued to regroup in Kharkiv oblast for offensive operations and conducted minor attacks south of Izyum. Despite Russian efforts to amass forces Izyum axis and in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has thus far not been able to conduct a major offensive surge or gain significant territories from Ukrainian defences. Over easter, the Russia conducted a series of strategic strikes

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on targets across Ukraine. These appear to be part of Russia's 'strategic operations' to attack Ukraine's strategic defence capacity while attempting to overwhelm its forces in the east.

On 14 April 2022, Ukraine claimed to have hit Russian cruiser Moskva with two R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles. The Ukrainian missiles were fired from a land-based launcher near Odesa while Moskva was located 60–65 nautical miles (111–120 km; 69–75 mi) offshore. Hours after the initial Ukrainian claim, the Russian Ministry of Defence said that a fire had caused munitions to explode and that the ship had been seriously damaged, without any statement of cause or reference to a Ukrainian strike. Later on 14 April, the Russian ministry said that Moskva sank while being towed during stormy weather. While symbolically painful for Russia, the loss of the Moskva also has practical effects on the ongoing war. The Moskva would have played a primary role in any potential amphibious assault on the Ukrainian coastal city of Odesa.

In south Ukraine, the battered city of Mariupol continued to offer significant resistance despite remaining under siege for nearly seven weeks. As of 17 April, Russian forces managed to capture major areas of the city and a few personnel from Ukraine's 38th Marine Brigade have surrendered. The Russian military estimated that about 2500 Ukrainian fighters holding out at a hulking steel plant with a warren of underground passageways provided the last pocket of resistance in Mariupol. Mariupol's seizure also would make more troops available for a new offensive in the east, which if successful, would Russia a position of strength from which to pressure Ukraine into making concessions.

Israel conducts successful Air Defence interceptions with Lasers

Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennet announced on April 14 that his country had developed an energy-based weapons system, Iron Beam – touted as the world's first, which uses a laser to shoot down incoming rockets, mortars, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Bennett noted that the system would cost only \$3.5 per shot. The Israeli prime minister highlighted the cost per shot of the new system was significant, given that in February 2022, while addressing a security affairs conference, Bennett pointed out that it costs tens of thousands of dollars to intercept the cheap rockets that Palestinian groups use to target Israeli



population centres, using the Iron Dome system. Defence Minister Benny Gantz highlighted that the new laser defence system will, therefore, be an 'efficient, inexpensive, innovative, protection umbrella'.

The news about the successful testing of the laser-based interception system in the Negev came

near the anniversary of Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel's May 2021 military intervention in the Gaza Strip, undertaken in response to Palestinian rocket attacks. During that operation, over 4,000 rockets were fired, out of which nearly 90 per cent deemed as a threat to civilian areas were intercepted by the Iron Dome system. The Iron Dome system, developed in the wake of the 2006 Lebanon War – when Israel faced a significant rocket threat from the Hezbollah on its northern borders, has been deployed since 2011. It has since seen action in 2012, 2014 and the 2021 military operations that Israel undertook in the Gaza Strip, registering a high degree of interception rates.

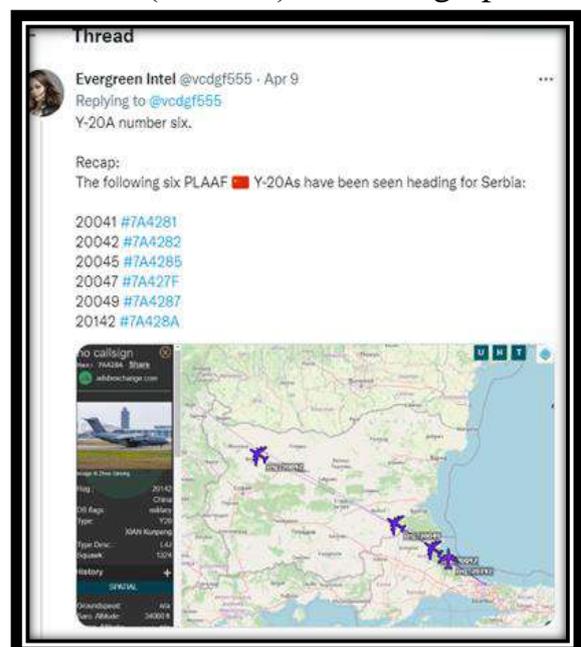
While the Iron Dome counters short-range rockets and projectiles, David's Sling system – deployed since 2017, is meant to counter medium-range rockets and projectiles. The Arrow system, deployed since 2000, is meant to counter longer-range missiles. Israel had also conducted live-fire intercept tests involving the three systems in December 2020, simulating a simultaneous threat environment involving cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and UAVs. Reports had then highlighted the significance of Israel conducting multi-layered missile defence tests, in the aftermath of the September 2019 Abqaiq attack, allegedly perpetrated by Iran on Saudi oil infrastructure using UAVs and cruise missiles. Earlier in June 2021, Israel had successfully intercepted UAVs using airborne laser, mounted on aircraft. With the successful tests of the ground-based laser system now, Israel expects the system will be made operational within the next year. This will provide the country with a significant and efficient new capability to more effectively counter short-range aerial threats.

The Iron Beam system, expected to be made operational within the next year, provides Israel with a significant and efficient new capability to more effectively counter short-range aerial threats.

China delivers anti-aircraft missiles to Serbia

A fleet of Six People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) Y-20 cargo planes were spotted in Nikola Tesla Airport, Belgrade on 08 March. As per reports, PLAAF aircraft delivered a battery of FK-3 medium-range, road-mobile, surface-to-air missiles. The FK-3 is an export version of the HQ-22 surface-to-air missile system, and it retains the domestic version's top speed of Mach 6, although its maximum range has been reduced from 170 Km to 150 Km. A typical HQ-22/FK-3 system consists of a radar vehicle and three launch vehicles equipped with four missiles each. Each battery can supposedly engage six air targets simultaneously.

The Y-20s flights to Serbia and back were monitored on flight-tracking



websites, which together with images and videos posted online from Belgrade indicated the aircraft were from the PLAAF's 13th Transport Division, 37th Air Regiment based out of Kaifeng in China's Henan province. China established an air bridge using PLAAF Y-20 cargo to transport the FK-3 missiles, and presumably other support equipment to Serbia over two days on 8-9 April. Each day's flights involved six Y-20s, which made stopovers in Baku, Azerbaijan, and Istanbul, Turkey, and also flew over central Asia, Armenia and Bulgaria before landing at Nikola Tesla Airport in the Serbian capital Belgrade.

Missile delivery is part of the military equipment purchase contract that Serbia concluded with China in 2020 which included CH-92 drones. The delivery of the Chinese missile battery has raised concerns about China's military power projection as well as local tensions. Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti each raised concerns the weapons systems could endanger their countries. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic has rejected criticism it's Chinese FK-3 surface-to-air missiles could pose a threat to its neighbours and described the purchase as "legitimate, completely regular and transparent". Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters, on 11 April, that the delivery was part of the two countries' annual cooperation plan, does not target any third parties and "has nothing to do with the current situation" in Ukraine.

Serbia's special situation as a European country outside of the EU — with an uncertain path toward membership — has made it an attractive target for China. Beijing has engaged in several massive projects in the Balkans, which include Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway. During the Winter Olympics in Beijing, Serbian President Vucic met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to honour the "iron-clad" friendship between the two countries. Chinese investments in Serbia are estimated to be 3 billion euros, while according to publicly available data, Chinese infrastructure loans in Serbia exceed 8 billion euros.

As the Ukraine war rages on, Serbia is feeling the heat because of its ties with Russia. On the one hand, Belgrade is tied to the West as the EU and NATO geographically encircle the country. On the other hand, Serbia is still dependent on Russian gas and its backing in the U.N. in the Kosovo dispute. The Ukraine conflict seems to have accelerated the process of Russia with China as Serbia's primary non-Western partner. Thus far Serbia has avoided making difficult choices between China and the United States because of the U.S.-brokered September 2020 agreement.

EU-China relations have been facing serious challenges. In a stronger than usual rebuke of Beijing, the European Union's foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell has dismissed the recent high-profile summit with China as a "dialogue of the deaf". Whether this demonstration of PLAAF strategic airlift capability by China in the EU's backyard is a response to the EU's censure remains an open question.